



Administrative Memorandum

Nebraska Supreme Court
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Judge John Irwin, Nebraska Court of Appeals, Named Chair of iCivics Nebraska

Former U. S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has named Nebraska Court of Appeals Judge John Irwin as Chair for O'Connor's iCivics initiative for Nebraska. iCivics was originally launched in 2007 by Justice O'Connor. The project grew from her concern that students are not receiving the information and tools they need for meaningful civic participation. Justice O'Connor believes civics teachers need improved materials and support. In a nonpartisan way, computer based learning activities focus on subjects such as voting, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, separation of powers, and the roles and responsibilities of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government.



iCivics is a web-based, nonprofit, educational organization whose mission is to reinvigorate the teaching of civics through interactive computer activities, innovative lesson plans, and online experiences so that middle and high school students throughout the United States will become active participants in our democracy. Prior to accepting the offer to become Chair, Judge Irwin shared the idea of iCivics with Chief Justice Heavican. The Chief Justice said he enthusiastically supported iCivics, having recently seen a demonstration by Justice O'Connor at a national meeting of Chief Justices.

Judge Irwin has been active in the areas of court reform and judicial ethics. In April last year he presented at the University of Pacific McGeorge School of Law symposium titled "Judicial Ethics and Accountability: at Home and Abroad." He has authored and co-authored articles on these topics for the Fordham Urban Law Journal, Court Review Magazine and the NSBA's, Nebraska lawyer. He has presented at the Fordham Law School symposium on the topic of judicial selection and presented for the American Bar Association on court related topics. Since 2008, he has been a Faculty Fellow for the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center involved in research and scholarship on projects related to the law and judicial system, improving the law and judicial system, and more meaningful participation in governmental processes.

When asked for comment, Irwin referred to language from a 2007 article co-authored with his judicial attorney, Daniel L. Real,

First, changes need to be made to improve “education” about the judicial branch. Although “education” is often a popular buzzword for reform efforts, to effect meaningful improvement in judicial retention elections, education must encompass far more than just voter guides and other adult education tools. Rather, changes need to be made at the academic level to promote more significant education about the judicial branch. School curricula need to include education about the workings of the judicial branch, the mechanisms of judicial selection and retention, and the importance of an independent and highly competent judiciary. It is vital that students begin learning about the judicial branch as a coequal branch of government and about the role of the public in ensuring an independent judiciary. Employing school curricula in this manner will change attitudes about the judiciary’s role in government, and will begin to foster an attitude and an interest in the public at a younger age that will translate into future voters who are more meaningfully involved in utilizing and optimizing judicial retention elections.

The iCivics Web page can be found: <http://www.icivics.org/>
Click on the **Judicial Branch** button to “Learn to Argue like a Lawyer or Make Fair Decisions like a Judge” or on the **Citizenship and Participation** button to “Learn More about Being an Active Citizen.”

